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THE DUTY OF AMERICAN CHURCHES TO IMMIGRANT PEOPLE

MARY CLARK BARNES

Mrs. Barnes is the founder of the Fireside League, a movement intended to teach the immigrants to read and to speak English by the use of simple textbooks based upon the Bible. The success of the league gives particular value to the following article.

It seems to have been the need of an Immigrant Protective Association in Jerusalem which called into existence the first body of deacons in the Christian church. The fact of their being required to be men "full of the Spirit and of wisdom," as well as "of good report," indicates an estimate of the importance of the work assigned them. The complaint which led to their appointment was that some foreign women were being "neglected in the daily ministration."

Today in America the neglected foreign element is so large a proportion of the entire population as to emphasize anew the need of the Spirit and of wisdom in dealing with it.

Much is being done by American churches through missions and missionary workers to give religious instruction to immigrant people in their own languages. Nobly Christian in motive and in aim as this work undoubtedly is, it cannot fully meet the needs of the multitude of strangers within our gates who are handicapped in every phase of the struggle of life by their ignorance of the language of the country in which they are living.

In the last 1900 years and, notably, in the last nineteen years, we have learned something of the value of pre-

ventive measures in dealing with need. Today we all agree that if an able, industrious man or woman is unable to earn a living wage because of inability to understand and speak the English language, the religious as well as the scientific way of meeting the need is to teach the language in order to make possible the earning of a living wage, rather than to arrange for permanently supplementing the diet by means of a bread-line or through a charity soup-kitchen.

The ability to understand and to speak English is the strongest implement of self-help that can be given in America to one unacquainted with our language. Without it all other helps are inadequate if not impotent. This is true not only in relation to economic need but also in relation to great ethical needs in immigrant homes.

The state through its public schools, the churches through their Sunday and industrial schools, philanthropy through child-welfare organizations, all are engaged in ministry to children. Inadequate results, especially in the case of the children of immigrants, are due to failure to include parents as well as children in the ministry of teaching.

In the case of a family transplanted from Central or Southern Europe or

Asia or Africa to America—a country whose language, customs, standards of life are as new, as incomprehensible to the parents as to the children—the welfare of the community requires that the parents as well as the children be reached as early as possible with Americanizing influences.

The children of immigrants, required by law to be educated in English, acquire the new language and the new standards of life in an almost incredibly short time. Then comes the rift in the family life.

The child counts himself an American; salutes the Stars and Stripes with a grace all his own; sings "My Country 'Tis of Thee" as lustily as any descendant of the writer of our National Hymn; and feels a growing consciousness of the inability of his foreign-looking, foreign-thinking, foreign-acting, foreign-speaking father and mother to guide him in ways of American life. Out of school he becomes a law unto himself, with the inevitable results found in court records.

Next to love, the primary, fundamental need of childhood is recognition of and reverence for parental judgment and authority. That need can be met only through parental understanding, appreciation, sympathy, guidance. Love, however great, needs for efficient expression the medium of a common speech, the inspiration of common ideals.

How many churches are engaged in the ministry of teaching English to immigrant parents, enabling them to keep in sympathetic touch with their children, to maintain the normal relation of guidance and control, and to incite them to careers of usefulness and honor?

Acquaintance with the English language is necessary to our immigrant people, not only as a means of meeting economic need and ethical need in their own families, but to enable them to be helpful factors in the communities in which they live.

A government of the people by the people cannot long be held at a level higher than the people. By as much as the number of citizens in the alley exceeds the number of citizens on the avenue—by so much can the alley outvote the avenue on any issue that may arise. Each year brings a million opportunities for promoting new ideals of Christian citizenship. At the present rate, this generation will see the arrival of 33,000,000 immigrants, more than 26,000,000 of them speaking languages other than English, and bringing with them habits, customs, ideals as alien as their speech. Have American churches any special message with which to meet this great incoming tide of human life?

In some sections a demand is heard that, in deference to the new-comers, Bible-reading and even the singing of hymns be banished from our public schools. Were this demand to be granted we should present to the world the spectacle of a nominally Christian nation in which the national system of education fails to acquaint the rising generation with the source of those ideals which are fundamental to the national life and character—a system of education ignoring the existence of that literature which by the verdict of history has been more potent in modern civilization than any other body of literature that the world ever has known.

The great majority of our non-English-speaking immigrants come from countries in which the Bible is not an open book, and in which they have had little opportunity to judge of its value. Professor J. R. Green, the great historian of the English people, says of the making of modern England: "No greater moral change ever passed over a nation than passed over England during the years which parted the middle of the reign of Elizabeth from the meeting of the Long Parliament. England became the people of a book, and that book was the Bible. . . . Far greater than its effect on literature or social phrase was the effect of the Bible on the character of the people at large. . . . Its effect in this way, however dispassionately we examine it, was simply amazing. The whole temper of the nation was changed. A new conception of life and of man superseded the old. A new moral and religious impulse spread through every class."¹

This is the dispassionate verdict, not of an ecclesiastic but of a clear-eyed historian of national life. Does America need today less than England needed three hundred years ago, "a new moral and religious impulse?"

That new religious consciousness which the great historian describes as coming into England with the coming of the Bible in the common speech of the

people was strongly dominant in those who crossed the sea to make the new England and the new nation on these shores. Today the old Pilgrim stock is fading out and is being replaced by immigrants who never have known the experience which Professor Green so vividly describes. To them, even as to the people of old England three hundred years ago, the teachings of the Bible in the speech of everyday life would fall "on ears which custom had not deadened to their force and beauty."

Protestant Christians have gloried in the independence of church and state in America. Have American churches realized their consequent obligation as well as privilege, to supply in the life of the people that which the state may fail to give?

EDITORIAL NOTE.—Readers of the above article will be glad to know that the first volume for the use of the Fireside League, entitled *Early Stories and Songs for New Students of English* (Fleming H. Revell & Co., New York and Chicago), was prepared by Mrs. Barnes. The volume contains forty-one lessons, twenty of which are based upon Old Testament stories, and nineteen upon New Testament stories, one upon the Beatitudes, and one upon the Lord's Prayer. In addition there are ten so-called songs selected from the Psalms, and an appendix containing number, time, and money lessons. The book is charmingly illustrated, and both by its method and appearance sorely tempts the reader to test its value on the nearest immigrant within his reach.

¹ *A Short History of the English People*, chap. viii, pp. 1 and 2.